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### Abstract

Analyzes some elements of *The Father Christmas Letters* to show the degree of perfectionism and philological logic that were used to create verisimilitude, even for such lesser elements of Tolkien's oeuvre.

### Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Languages—Arktik; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Father Christmas Letters*

## A Philologist at the North Pole:

J.R.R. Tolkien and The Father Christmas Letters

Paul Nolan Hyde

Humphrey Carpenter, in an attempt to depict J.R.R. Tolkien's penchant for detail, cites several examples of the labors involved in producing both academic and creative works. After discussing Tolkien's capacity for bringing humanity and emotion to philology, Carpenter suggests a possible source for that rhetorical power:

It ought also to be said that he was immensely painstaking. Broad and powerful statements such as that quoted above may have characterized his work, yet they were no mere assertions, but the product of countless hours of research into the minutiae of the subject. Even by the usual scrupulous standards of comparative philology, Tolkien was extraordinary in this respect. His concern for accuracy cannot be overemphasised, and it was doubly valuable because it was coupled with a flair for detecting patterns and relations. 'Detecting' is a good word, for it is not too great a flight of fancy to picture him as a linguistic Sherlock Holmes, presenting himself with an apparently disconnected series of facts and deducing from them the truth about some major matter. He also demonstrated his ability to 'detect' on a simpler level, for when discussing a word or phrase with a pupil he would cite a wide range of comparable forms and expressions in other languages. (Biography, p. 135)

Later in the Biography, Carpenter amplifies his observations:

Tolkien had a passion for perfection in written work of any kind, whether it be philology or stories. This grew from his emotional commitment to his work, which did not permit him to treat it in any manner other than with the deeply serious. Nothing was allowed to reach the printer until it had been revised, reconsidered, and polished. (Biography, p. 138)

One does not have to go far into the manuscripts and holographs of *The Hobbit* and of *The Lord of the Rings* before realizing how much 'reconsideration' there is in the final texts of those volumes. C.S. Lewis wryly remarked that Tolkien's "standard of self-criticism was high and the mere suggestion of publication usually set him upon a revision, in the course of which so many new ideas occurred to him that where his friends had hoped for a final text of an old work they actually got the first draft of a new one." (Ibid.) But what of the private and family creations which, as far as we can tell, were not originally intended for publication and would not be published until after his death? *The Father Christmas Letters* demonstrate as felicitously as anywhere in his writings, the initial care and concern for detail that J.R.R. Tolkien took in the first moments of sub-creation.

The Letters began in 1920 when John, the eldest of the

Tolkien children was three years of age. During the next twenty years, the children received an annual epistle recounting the affairs of an increasingly complex household at the North Pole. To Father Christmas himself is soon added North Polar Bear (eventually identified by the name Karhu) whose frequent faux pas cause great consternation to the old gentleman. Subsequently there are Snow-elves, Red Gnomes, Snow-men, Cave-bears, and others who are woven into the texture of the stories. Still later, Goblins appear in the caves beneath the North Pole and the Elves become instrumental in defending Father Christmas' home. Pre-eminent among the Elves is Ilbereth, who with the help of Karhu, writes some of the later letters. Here, as in *The Lord of the Rings*, the "tale grew in the telling" (I, p. 5).

Together with the stories were 'artifacts' from the North Pole: paintings and illustrations of Father Christmas and of the activities related in the letters; elaborately drawn postage stamps; goblin alphabets; phrases in Arctic (an Elven dialect); and various types of handwriting and spelling, depending on who was preparing the letter. In conjunction with the artifacts, great pains were taken to extend the verisimilitude of the letters even to the manner in which the letters arrived; sometimes by Father Christmas himself (a snowy footprint having been left behind) or by the local postman (in league with the children's parents). So delightful was the experience that the older children could not bring themselves to reveal the real author of the letters even though they had figured it out for themselves. All of these details worked together to establish in the minds of the children the reality of Father Christmas and of his associates. (See *Biography*, p. 164)

### Ilbereth the "Spider-handed"

Although much could be made of the interaction between Polar Bear and Ilbereth (Father Christmas' Elven secretary), and perhaps also of the difference in hand-writing between Ilbereth and Father Christmas, of most interest is the salutation written in elvish script in the 1937 letter. Ilbereth says at the conclusion of the letter, "I try to write like dear old Father Christmas (without the trembles), but I cannot do so well. I can write Elvish better." He then gives a line of faint script which I have rendered in two fashions below:

Figure 1

—  
Ilbereth's Greeting

Ilbereth then concludes the letter: "That is some -- but Father Christmas says I write even that too spidery and you would never read it; it says: A very merry Christmas to you all. Love, Ilbereth."

The fascinating observation to be made here is that with a little "un-spidery-ing" the writing becomes a form of Simplified Sindarin Tengwar. A likely transcription is given below:

Figure 2

## A Transcription of Ilbereth's Greeting

```
a v e r y m e r r y c h r i s t m a s
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16
t o y o u a l l
17 18 19 20 21
```

Even with a casual perusal of the original (not reproduced here, unfortunately), it becomes obvious that regardless of the Tengwar usage, the spelling is primarily phonetical. There is no spelling distinction made between the double "r" of #7 and the single "r"s of #3 and #10. There is a distinction made between the "y"s of #4 and #8 as contrasted with that of #19. In conjunction with this latter, notice that the "i" of #11 is the same character as those of #4 and #8, undoubtedly phonetically justified. #18 and #20 are phonetically the same although they are spelled differently in English. Notice also the three forms of "a" in #1, #15, and #21. All other characters appear to be consistent with spelling even though some seem to be a bit aberrant.

Singularly missing from the original characters #1, #5, and #14, are the closing lines beneath the luvas which would make them appropriate to the traditional Tengwar system as "v", "m", and "m". As they stand now, #1 could be "nd" or "d" (if the telco is a descender), "nt" or "dh" (if the telco is an ascender); #5 and #14 are inescapably "n" or "nn" in their present forms. Ilbereth's writing may be so "spidery" that the horizontal underlines are all but invisible. A similar effect may be responsible for the elision of the lower loop in #21 (the letter "T" or "l") leaving only the cross bar visible. Using visual elision as a consistent hypothesis, the absence of the descending loops of #12 and #16 (the letter "s") might be accounted for as well. There is nothing extraordinary about #13 and #17 (the letter "t"). #9, however, leaves a little room for discussion because of the superscripted line above the character. The question is whether #9 is a disconnected closed character (Tolkien #4 from the Tengwar chart in Appendix E of *The Lord of the Rings*) or an open character (Tolkien #3) with a superscripted macron of some sort. If the former, the character would be a simple "k", a phonetic representation of beginning phoneme of "Christmas". If the latter, then the character could represent "k" or "ch", both spelling and sound. The macron would then represent the presence of silent orthographic "h". This seems unlikely, however, since the rest of the greeting is primarily phonetic in its presentation.

The vowel system is interesting but not sufficiently represented to be completely definitive. As was suggested

above, the characters #4, #8, and #11 are phonetically the same, as /I/ most likely (suspiciously British, I might add). #18 and #20 are probably /u/. The character for "e" seems to be a form of a long vowel carrier or an exaggeration and elision form of the regular Simplified Sindarin character for "e". The long descender may just be part of Ilbereth's orthographic style (see #3, #7, #10 for "r"). The three "a"s are difficult, but I suspect that #21 is a form of the Simplified Sindarin character for "o", reflecting pronunciation. #15 is probably Ilbereth's phonetic /a/. #1, the most difficult of all, may very well be /ei/ phonetically, using the "e" descender and the great loop for a superscripted dot. But, after all, it may be no more than a British /e/, and only the descender counts, attached to an elaborate "v" character.

## Karhu and the Goblin Alphabet

Other than Father Christmas himself, the North Polar Bear is the most personable figure in *The Father Christmas Letters*. It was he who broke the North Pole while fetching Father Christmas' hood, turned the Pole black from an overdose of Aurora Borealis, blew up the cellar with firecrackers, flooded the English Delivery Room while asleep in his bathtub, and a sundry of other antics. He frequently added commentary to Father Christmas' letters as a kind of banter, invariably misspelling his emendations. He was, however, a hard worker when necessary and enormously brave in a pinch. His escapades with Ilbereth were uproarious at times and their tet-et-tets were humorous. Once after making fun of Polar Bears overly zealous eating spree and subsequent stomach ache (all in verse), Karhu replied:

```
ABSOLUTE ROT:
I HAVE NOT GOT
A PAIN IN MY POT.
I DO NOT EAT
TURKEY OR MEAT:
I STICK TO THE SWEET.
WHICH IS WHY
(AS ALL KNOW) I
AM SO SWEET MYSELF
YOU THINNUOUS ELF!
GOODBY!
```

"Thinuous" is, as might be expected, unique in English literature to Karhu. In his written kbitzing, Polar Bear has "Ther" for "There", "Doo" for "Do", "Litening and Feirworks" for "Lightening and Fireworks", "Rhiming Nonses" for "Rhyming Nonsense", "Goodby" for "Goodbye", but he does correctly spell "Immensely". Some of the "phonetic spelling" shows up in the letter written in the Goblin alphabet that Karhu invented using symbols found in the caves beneath the North Pole. Figure 3 is a computer generated representation of the original letter; Figure 4 is the transcription. The asterisks in Figure 3 indicate characters that have additional material in the original. The characters read top to bottom and left to right. The numbers along the left margin and across the top are for easy reference to the characters

Figure #3  
Karhu's Letter in the Goblin Alphabet

Figure 4  
Transcription of Karhu's Letter

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	I	Y	N	S	T	O	A	TH	TH
2	W	CH	D	O	S	C I	T	A	I
3	I	R	I	F	CH	E	I	T	S
4	SH	I	D	F	O O	V	N	Y	and
5	Y	S	N	U	L	E	and	OU	S ee
6	OU	T	EW	N	Y	R	F	W i	M
7	A	M	Y	and	OU	N	R	L	U
8	L	A	EA	G	A	OW	E	EA	CH

9	A	S	R	OO	R e	WH	N	S	L
10	V e	and	W	D	G	A	CH	I	O
11	R	A	I	L	E	T	and	L	V e
12	Y	S	TH	U	TT	W	G	Y	F
13	H	P	L	C	I	I	R	R	R o
14	A	L	O	K	NG	TH	EE	EA	M
15	PP	E	T	A	S	L	K	D	P
16				B					

The letter reads, of course, as follows: "I wish you al a very happy Christmas and a splendid New Year with lots of fun and good luck at school.[.] You are getting so clever now what with Latin and French and Greek that you wil easily read this and see much love from P.[B].[" The odd spellings here are "al" for "all" and "wil" for "will" which could be easily explained by Karhu's spelling deficiency. However, whether by chance or design, the characters for the "T"s, on the original, in both cases appear to differ slightly from all of the others: a small ball on the point of the lower triangle.

Figure 5  
Karhu's Odd "L's"



The ball may be fortuitous as there is a sign specified for double characters (easily seen in character #15-1; the subscribed hard bracket). The use of the hard bracket is limited to the double "p" and double "t" (#12-5), and where there were opportunities to use the "double sign" (#9-4, #4-5, #14-7, and #5-9.2; all vowels) Karhu choses not to.

There are obvious corrections to the original text: #10-1.2, #9-5.2, #2-6.2, #6-8.2, #5-9.2 were added after the first writing, #11-9 may or may not be emendations as also #9-4 and #4-5, but I think it unlikely. The original manuscript could help here. The corrections are diverse and do not seem to indicate a consistent flaw in spelling, just an unfamiliar hand at a newly invented form of writing.

The orthographic patterns are too diverse and complex to discuss here (that is a pedantic way of saying "I haven't completely figured them out yet"), but there are systematic connections between the vowels and the semi-vowels that can easily be seen and I suspect alternations between front and back articulation, voicing, aspiration, and other linguistic superstructure, but there are little variations in any proposed structure that defy a reconciliation with an El-

visish or Tolkienian system. JRRT would probably say, "Well, we are dealing with a bear here. What were you expecting?"

The vowels are given in Figure 6:  
Goblin Alphabet Simple Vowels

◊=o    人=a    人=e    ◊=i    人=u    人=w

Perhaps the best way to perceive the major patterns is to begin with the graphemes that involve the letter "o" and related variations. Figure 7 gives those variations:

Figure 7

Variations of the "o" Vowel

The base character is an inverted triangle with a line

人=oa    人=oi    人=ou

curving up and to the left from the top side (it reminds me of a three-cornered cherry still on its stem). The other three characters which have "o" in combination ("oa", "ou/ow", and "oi") all share the "o" feature. "oa" adds "a" which looks like a stick figure with a triangle for a head. Because of the similarity between the upper part of "a" (the triangle) and the complete character for the letter "o", all that is needed is the addition of the curved line (the stem) to the top of the "a" character. "ou/ow" is a little more complex, but not much. "u" is represented by a vertical "dumbbell" with a horizontal, elongated "s" (like arms, the left curving up and the right curving down). For "ou" or "ow" the upper ball is replaced by the three-cornered cherry. "oi" is formed much the same way. "i" is portrayed as one-balled vertical dumbbell with a divided oval immediately beneath the ball. "oi" is formed in the same fashion as "ou" by replacing the ball with the stemmed triangle. The remainder of the vowel combinations work in a similar way.

Some other observations are possible to demonstrate a kind of order. The only difference between a "u" and a "w" (see Figure 6) is that the bottom part of the vertical dumbbell is a triangle rather than a ball and the right arm touches the top of the triangle. "i", "j" and "y" are similar in their structure.

Figure 8

"i", "j", and "y" Similarities

◊=i    人=j    人=y

Neither of these (u/w and i/j/y) should be too surprising to those who are passingly familiar with the history of English orthography. It is obvious that Karhu was. Several of the consonant combinations using "h" ("gh", "ph", "th", and "wh") implement the character for "h" (a double-stemmed triangular cherry) in the same fashion that "o" was used in combination above.

Figure 9

"h" Variations

人=h    人=gh    人=ph    人=th    人=wh

The combinations "ch" and "sh" are formed differently

without the triangle, perhaps indicating that the nature of the articulation of these digraphs is somewhat different from the other four. (This is a bright bear!)

The rest of the consonant system seems a little loose, but there is a kind of order if characters are grouped by articulation: "b"/"p"; "d"/"t"; "m"/"n"/"ng"; "c"/"k"/"ck" (this latter is another digraph). Other than those which have been previously pointed out, grouping the characters by visual likeness is not always fortuitous: "b"/"t" (?); "g"/"gh"/"r" (unless this is some kind of ursine graphic humor about growling).

All in all, the Goblin Alphabet has the appearance of having been designed by a knowledgeable hand, but it was not the hand of a Feanor or a Daeron; it was the hand of a Polar Bear. It somehow seems appropriate, and reinforces the perception that Tolkien never let his characters go beyond themselves. Verisimilitude would not allow it.

## Karhu in the Arctic

Karhu's spelling foibles were attributed to the fact that he had learned English as a second language, that Arctic was his native tongue. In one of the letters to the Tolkien children he gives an example of Arctic in a farewell to them, "*Mara mesta an ni vela tye ento, ya rato nea*" and translated it as "Goodbye till I see you next, and I hope it will be soon". There is no published parsing of this sentence, just the translation, and we are left to our own devices as to how the vocabulary and grammar of Arctic relate to that of the translation.

A friend of mine, knowing that I was working on the linguistics of *The Father Christmas Letters*, observed that the passage seemed to be Spanish in composition, or at least similar. Certainly the phrase "ya rato nea" (meaning, presumably, "I hope it will be soon") is quite like "ya rato sea" (meaning, approximately, "may it already be soon"). At least it is close enough to pursue the same tack on the rest of the sentence. Of the ten words, five (*mesta*, *ni*, *vela*, *ya*, and *rato*) are legitimate Spanish vocabulary. Four others (*Mara*, *an*, *ento*, and *nea*) have a Spanish form or sound to them although not included by the Royal Spanish Academy in their description of the language. However, the meanings of the legitimate words in Spanish do not universally support the translation: "*mesta*" is (1) "a union of cattle raisers", (2) "a confluence of two or more streams"; "*ni*" is a conjunction meaning "neither, nor"; "*vela*" is more felicitous as a verb ("velar") meaning (1) "to watch, keep a vigil", (2) "to appear above water (as rocks)", (3) "to assist with the Holy Sacrament", (4) "to cover, veil, or hide"; "*ya*" means (1) "now, already, at once", (2) used as an emphatic expletive; "*rato*" means (1) "valid", (2) "short time, while, little while". However much we may want to have the passage be related to Spanish, it appears that the seeming cognates are of the same class as *Incanus*, looking like real language, fitting the context, yet having another, totally consistent derivation in an invented language. I propose that Arctic is an ursine dialect of Quenya.

*mara* — In *The Lost Road* (p. 371), "*mara*" is glossed as a Quenya word derived from "*magra* meaning 'useful, fit, good (of things)'; 'Namarie' is well-known as a word signifying 'farewell'."

*mesta* — I suggest that this is somehow related to Quenya "*metta*" meaning "end," the Sindarin word being "methed." The articulatory difference between "t", "s", and "th" is slight enough to justify the ursine pronunciation.

*an* — Quenya uses "*an*" with the sense "to, towards" and as a prepositional-type marker for the genitive case. I suggest that the semantic similarity of "to", "towards", "unto", and "until" is acceptable to the translation.

*ni* — According to *The Lost Road* (p. 378), "*ni*" means "I", the first-person singular pronoun.

*vela* — The Spanish verb for "to see" is "ver", although the possibility of "velar" was discussed above. There are three words in Tolkien's invented vocabulary that translate into English using the word "see": *the-* (LR-392), *ken* (MC-222), and *neka* (MC-223). The latter means "vague, faint, dim to see" and probably can be dismissed as having direct bearing on the issue here. *ken*, although it does mean "see, behold", is in articulation much too far away from *vela* to be considered seriously. Without going into an elaborate discussion about the possible semantic relationships between words, I propose that the Noldorin *the-* and its derivatives would be manifested in Quenya as *se-* (as *Itihl Isil*, and *thelci seler*). This still does not get us to *vela*. However, the names for Elwe's brother in *The Lost Road* ("Etymologies", p. 392) are given as: (Quenya) *Sindo*, (Ilkorin) *Thind*, and (Telerin) *Findo*. The Telerin variation sets up a possible Noldorin *\*thela*, a Quenya *\*sela*, a Telerin *\*fela*, and from there a back-borrowing of *\*fela* as *vela* (the articulation difference between "f" and "v" is simple voicing). This is quite convoluted, but in all candor, I really don't think the Spanish verb is the answer and I am willing to accept almost any argument in order to avoid direct Iberian influence.

*tye* — If the letter from which the Arctic passage was taken from was written to only one of the children (either very early or very late in the series), then "you" in the translation would be singular. If two of the children were still receiving the letters, then the "you" could be understood as a dual. If three or more, then "you" would be a second-person plural. I believe that if there were only one child the form would be *tye* or something very much like it (Bill Welton would have *elye*, *Introduction to Elvish*, p. 25). *tye* is probably a dual meaning "you two" or a plural meaning "you all".

*ento* — *The Lost Road* (p. 356) has an adjective form *enta* which means "yonder, that, thither", a possible oblique reference. *en* meaning "again" (U-317) is more likely, with a suffixal *-to*, or a possible reference to *tul* meaning "fetch, bring, bear, move, come".

*ya* — *The Lost Road* (p. 399) has *ya* glossed as a Quenya

word meaning "formerly, ago, there". Jim Allen glosses *ya* as the relative pronoun "which" (Introduction, p. 42)

*rato* — *The Lost Road* (p. 383) defines *rat-* as "walk, with Noldorin *rado*, 'to make a way, find a way'. One could make a case for the Quenya form *\*rato* by analogy with other cognates using the 'd/t' alternation (Atan, Adan).

*nea* — *Unfinished Tales* (p. 317) gives *nai* as meaning "may it be that", and *ea* as "is" (in the commanding sense). I suggest a verb form here similar to the subjunctive.

A loose translation of the above, maintaining literalness as much as possible, could be as follows: "Good endings until I see you two (you all) again, may it be that we can find the way there (to the 'again' time)".

It would appear that J.R.R. Tolkien adapted a dialect of Quenya to the speaking creatures of the North Pole, probably taking into account in part the nature of the Polar Bears, Karhu in particular, and the vast amount of time that had passed since the Elven tongues were universally spoken in Middle-earth.

## Conclusions

But isn't this a bit serious for a series of Christmas letters to children who would have but a rudimentary understanding of linguistic theory? Perhaps, but in order for the children to believe, the father had to believe first. The alphabet, the scripts, and the language all had to have credibility to him before he could sub-create powerfully enough to make it believable for others. J.R.R. Tolkien was driven by his emotional attachment to his avocation and profession to perfection; he was driven by his paternal love to bend that perfection into childhood joy.

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